

Screw That by EvieSmallwood

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Summary:

“My mom was young... My dad was older, had a cushy job, the money, good family. So, they bought a nice house at the end of the cul-de-sac and started their nuclear family.”

“Screw that.”

“Yeah. Screw that.”

Or: It's 1985, and the Wheeler family is pretty much in shambles.

Screw That

Author's Note:

This work was inspired by veausy's Cherubim, which is a fantastic piece of art that you should all read. It really got me thinking about the Wheeler family, so here we go!

It's the third time in a week that they've fought.

He's been keeping a tally, he realises—ever since last month, when they'd had that huge blowout over dinner. It's been three weeks, with bickering and yelling nearly every day since.

Mike rolls over on his bed, turning to face the wall. He sighs loudly, knowing it won't do anything at all. More than anything, he wants to leave (but he can't, because it's ten at night, and Wednesday, so there's nothing to do anyway). Yelling back at them would even be better than just lying here while everything falls apart.

That's what it really feels like. That's what it's felt like for a long time—maybe even his whole life. When he was a kid, he hadn't really noticed, but the signs had been there; not talking at breakfast, short tones during phone calls, and a general discontent that shifted the whole atmosphere of the house when present. Then his dad had started sleeping on the Lay-Z-Boy, and his mom stopped setting his dad's place at the table because she knew he wasn't coming home until after dark.

It had progressed over the years, from terse to tense. It was like there was a storm overhead that no one was acknowledging. Sometimes the thunder clapped, and they would have arguments in short bursts, but it never led to lightning until now.

He'd been so wrapped up in his own shit last year, worrying about Will and grieving someone who wasn't even dead. He hadn't realised it was bad until it was *bad*; until now, when he's lying in bed and pretty much hoping for a miracle.

It comes in the form of a knock at his door. Given that the voices of his parents haven't dimmed at all, he knows it must be Nancy.

She cracks the door before he even says it's okay. Her hair is a little wet from the snow, curling at the edges and glowing from the dim light of the hallway. "Hey," she rasps.

He sits up, flicks his lamp on, and squints at her. "You're home late."

"I was studying," she says. "With Jonathan."

That's still weird to him. He's known them both his whole life—well, it seems that way with Jonathan, anyway—and they've always been so separate. The idea of them together is completely bizarre.

Still, he doesn't say anything about it, because that's not what they do in the Wheeler family.

Nancy glances at the closed door and then at his top bunk. "Can I sit in here for a while?"

Mike shrugs. "Yeah, sure."

She climbs up without using the ladder. The whole bed rocks even though she can't weigh more than a hundred or so pounds. It strikes him that he really needs a regular bed.

"Holly's still asleep?"

"Yeah."

They both wince as a door slams downstairs—maybe to the bathroom, or the basement. More yelling follows.

"I didn't see this coming," Nancy says, after a minute.

Mike glances at her. "Yeah, me neither."

"I mean... I knew their marriage sucked but... I figured they'd hold out until at least we were both in college, and then they'd be too old to fight."

He acts on a split second decision and jumps up, clambering onto the top bunk with her. They sit across from one another, criss-cross-applesauce, just like when they were kids. He remembers that they used to plan out D&D campaigns up here, and play go-fish when they both had colds.

“I never really thought about it,” he admits.

Nancy rolls her eyes. “Of course you didn’t,” she says. “You were too absorbed in your stupid video games and dorky friends—”

“Don’t act like you haven’t played them too,” Mike snaps, though he isn’t irritated in the slightest. She starts laughing. “And for the record, Steve is like, way dorkier than all of my friends combined. Have you *seen* him imitate Tom Cruise?”

Nancy grins. “I think he’s more your friend than mine these days.”

They both quiet. The whole house seems to for that moment. The silence is piercing. Mike chews his lip. “You were really good with Steve,” he tells her, tentatively, because they haven’t talked like this in so long and the last thing he wants to do is fuck it up. “Why did you...?”

Her face scrunches up in that way, the way they both get when they’re so deep in thought it’s like they’ve entered their own mind. “He just wasn’t what I was looking for,” she says, after a minute.

Mike thinks about that—about the way Steve really doesn’t seem okay. He puts on a brave face for them during those Friday night sleepovers at the always-empty Harrington house, but there are moments when the conversation will turn to Jonathan or Nancy, and he’ll quiet until the subject changes. He seems so *lonely*.

“How...” Nancy hesitates, and then forges ahead anyway. “How did you know with Eleven?”

He blinks, because the last thing he ever expected was his older sister asking him for relationship advice. “Um,” he pauses. *He just wasn’t what I was looking for.* “I guess the thing about El is that I wasn’t... I wasn’t looking for anything, you know? I just found her. Then I lost

her, and that's when I realised how-how much she meant." He blushes a little. "God, this sounds so stupid."

Nancy is wearing that endeared smile their mom gets when she's taking family photos or writing little notes for their school lunches. It's a smile that usually stems from idealism, and it's so much more meaningful when it's rooted in sentimentality. "It's not stupid," she says. "It's cute."

"You're disgusting."

She doesn't even retort with an insult. "You're a romantic."

Mike rolls his eyes. "This conversation is too mushy for me."

"Well, we could talk about our shared traumas," she suggests. "Or we could talk about my ex some more..."

Something shatters. They both whirl toward the door. The yelling is so loud, but it's now accompanied by crying—crying from their mom, and from Holly.

"He's breaking plates," Mike whispers, almost awed, because never in a million years did he think his dad would break something purposefully; all he does is fix things.

Yet here he is, breaking plates and breaking hearts.

"I'll get Holly," Nancy says, a little breathless. "Just stay here, okay? I'll come back, and then we can leave. We'll go to the arcade or something."

She's slipping off the bed when he says, wildly, "It's not open."

"Jonathan's, then, we'll go there."

They don't go there.

They drive by the house to discover darkened windows, which only frustrates Nancy, because of course something else has to go wrong.

So she keeps driving, and Mike plays with the radio, and Holly hums some Disney song under her breath while she draws pictures in the fog on the windows.

It hadn't taken much effort to slip out of the house. Their parents had been in the living room, her mom yelling about how Ted was never home and prioritised his work before his family, etc., etc., and they'd walked right out.

God, this was getting annoying. Wasn't it enough that they'd saved the world twice? Didn't that mean that at least—at least they could have some peace and quiet at home?

Nancy sighs, because it really isn't about them. It's mostly about her mother, who started out her family thinking it would be just like *Leave It To Beaver*, only for everything to fall apart right under her nose.

She taps her thumbs on the steering wheel and pulls into a gas station. Mike glances at her. "The tank is still half full."

"I know," she fishes around in her purse. "Here's five bucks. Go get us a slushie."

Mike groans, takes the five, and practically rolls out of the car. Nancy watches him walk in.

Holly climbs up through the console gap and sits in Mike's vacant seat. She's cuddling her cabbage patch kid to her chest. "I'm asposed to be asleep."

Nancy nods. "Yeah, I know. You can crash in the back seat if you're tired."

Holly shakes her head. She looks everything like her and Mike, and yet so different all at the same time. "I don't wanna."

She ends up climbing back there anyway, and falls asleep fast. Nancy and Mike lean against the hood of the car, sharing the slushie and not talking.

The drink leaves their lips red, and their teeth chattering against the

cool February breezes, but Nancy doesn't mind. It's better than being at home.

In March, things settle down again, and with the spring comes a hope for renewal. It fades with June and July; the heat melting away all second thoughts and cares.

They fight daily.

"I don't *give a shit*, Ted!"

Mike winces, pausing his narration of their latest campaign. His friends glance at the stairs, from where the voices drift even though the door is closed.

Max throws him a sympathetic glance, as does Will. Mike *hates* that; he hates that they pity him for this, like it's his fault, like something is awfully wrong (which it is, but they can always come back from this, right?).

Gathering his courage, he scoots away from the table. "I'll be right back."

The mumble something collectively. Mike runs up the stairs and slips into the kitchen. Holly's backpack is on the floor, leaning against the island. She's nowhere in sight, though.

Which means she's hiding, he realises, a little exasperated and a little envious. He checks under the table, mindless of his parents' arguing—it seems like they've circled back to his mom's drinking again—and finds her hidden behind the table cloth, colouring in a little booklet.

"Hey, Holiday," he says.

Holly sniffs. "Hi, Mikey."

"Can I see your drawing?"

She hands the paper over. There are drying teardrops all over the pink and blue dinosaur, but it's more neat than usual. He smiles. "It's beautiful."

“You can have it if you want.”

Mike smiles. She’s always giving them to people. “Maybe keep this one—but we can show my friends if you want? I’m sure they’d love to see it.”

She brightens. “Really?!”

“Go to hell!”

Mike hides a grimace behind another smile. “Really.”

She eagerly takes his hand and lets him lead her out from under the table. He picks her up and carries her the rest of the way, down the basement steps.

His friends quiet their own bickering, which isn’t nearly as hostile as what’s going on above. Holly shies into Mike’s shoulder.

“It’s okay,” he says, setting her down. “You can show them.”

It takes a small nudge, and then she’s timidly walking over. She knows most of them, but she’s usually asleep or doing those pre-school worksheets when they’re around.

Holly goes to Max, because she’s the only other girl. “This is my dinosaur, Richard. He’s really fat because he doesn’t eat leaves. Teacher says that means he’s a carnivore—”

“Carnivore,” Mike corrects gently, sitting down.

“That. And he’s pink because that’s his favourite colour, and it’s mine too, and Nancy’s. Mike’s is green, did you know that? Mike likes dinosaurs too. That’s why I picked this one.”

He can’t help but smile as he rifles through his D&D notes. “Thanks, Holiday.”

Max pauses in the middle of praising the drawing. “Holiday?”

“I was born three days before Christmas,” Holly proclaims proudly, like it’s the world’s greatest achievement. “That’s why my name is

Holly and my nickname is Holiday and daddy says I'm the best Christmas present he ever got."

It sounds ridiculous when she puts it like that, but to a nine year old Mike and thirteen year old Nancy it had all made perfect sense.

Max nods. "I'll bet," she says.

Dustin pats the empty chair, which is reserved for El—whenever she'll be able to join them. "You wanna sit?"

"Can I play?"

"Um," Mike pauses, wondering if she'll even be able to comprehend what's going on. "It's a little complicated, but you can watch, and maybe next time you'll know enough, okay?"

This is good enough for her. She clambers into the seat and smiles at them all.

"Okay, so, we were in the Eldertree forest—"

"IT DOESN'T FUCKING MATTER! YOU SHOULD'VE MARRIED YOUR GOD-DAMNED BOSS!"

"Are mommy and daddy gonna get divorced?"

This startles Mike enough to look at her. They're all silent. "What?"

"That's what happened to Trisha's parents at school," Holly explains, getting a little tearful. "They fought all the time and now they're not married anymore."

She starts to cry. Mike acts on instinct, grabbing her chair and pulling it closer so that he can wrap his arms around her. He looks to Lucas, hoping his face conveys the *What the hell am I supposed to say?!* feeling he's experiencing.

Lucas shrugs unhelpfully. Holly only sobs. "Listen," Mike is scrambling for coherency, because he really just doesn't know, and that thought keeps him up at night too. "Divorce, um... it sounds really scary, but sometimes it's good."

“H-How?”

“Well, mom and dad wouldn’t fight anymore. And you’d get *two* Christmases.”

That’s all he’s got. It doesn’t help much, because Holly never really cared about gifts. “But daddy wouldn’t live here anymore. He wouldn’t love us anymore.”

“That’s not...” Mike pinches the space between his brows.

“It’s not true,” Max finishes for him. “My parents got divorced, and my dad still loves me. He sends me letters, and I get to visit him when I want.”

Holly sniffs. “Really?”

“Really,” Mike affirms. “But it’d be a little different, because dad would live closer. You’d probably get to see him every weekend or something.”

Holly looks to Max. “Where does your dad live?”

“California,” she replies, almost wistful but not quite. “That’s where I’m from.”

“Far?”

She nods. “Far.”

Dustin breaks the short silence by holding out a bag of twizzlers. “Anyone?”

They all take one.

It’s one month later when their parents sit them down in the living room.

“Your father and I...” her mother begins, before pausing painfully.

You’re getting a divorce.

“We’re getting a divorce,” says Ted.

We know.

“We know this is gonna be hard for you to take in,” their mom puts one hand on Nancy’s knee and the other on Mike’s. “But you’re strong kids. You can handle this.”

Nancy and Mike exchange glances, and she knows they’re both thinking the exact same thing: *I’d take monsters over this any day.*

At least when they’re fighting, they’re working toward something. Defeating a monster, closing an inter-dimensional gate, exposing the government for what it is. This is... this is like putting on plastic armour and pretend-playing war just to kill time.

It’s all so stupid and arbitrary. She hates that they’re just standing there with those dumb confident looks on their faces, like they’ve come to some big conclusion, like it wasn’t obvious the whole time.

“So where’s dad gonna live?”

It’s no question that their mom is keeping the house. Their dad, who’s standing by the fireplace, takes his glasses off and wipes the frames. “An apartment in the city.”

Karen smiles painfully. “It’s really for the best.”

Yeah, sure. “And you’re sure this is what’s gonna make you happy?”

They both hesitate, and then say it at the same time: “Absolutely.”

They talk about all of it for another thirty minutes or so—it’s more like their parents rambling on while Mike and Nancy nod, both too fed up to really care about the details but trying not to let that show.

“I think I need to go for a drive,” Nancy says, at last.

Mike nods eagerly. “Me too.”

“Okay, well... be back for dinner?” This might be our last one ever.

“Yeah.”

They scramble out the door. Nancy fumbles with the keys. “Slushie?”

Mike grins. “Tubular.”